

A Plan for a More Livable Downtown

Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck
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Downtown Seattle is a great place to shop, work, and visit. Our city center is clean, vibrant with historic districts that are the envy of the nation. Our downtown offers visitors plenty to see and do. It is only 3% of our city's land mass, but approximately 80% of our city's image.

However, while we have many downtown residents who enjoy the urban experience, much more needs to be done to attract a wider variety of residents, especially families. Attracting families is a difficult task, but a worthy one. Currently, families often choose to live outside the city where the quality of life for children is perceived to be higher than in the urban core. Living outside the city can often be more affordable, which also pulls would-be residents away from the city. This is creating unwanted suburban sprawl and a downtown core that lacks a diversity of residents, especially those of moderate income. For the future of our city and of our region, a careful plan is needed to make our downtown an attractive and functional place to live.

We aren't seeking out families because we think they are somehow better than other types of residents. However, if we make our downtown friendly to kids, it will be much friendlier and safer for everyone. Plus, singles and retirees are not the groups spreading out to the suburbs, but rather families. This is long-standing, yet alarming trend that we must work to reverse. Otherwise our transportation challenges and other environmental issues will continue to negatively affect our daily lives. As we know, land use and urban design policies are tied directly with transportation issues.

In mid-2005, the Mayor proposed changes to our city's land use code to encourage the development of taller, thinner buildings in order to help spur development downtown and thus encourage more people to live downtown. While this is a step in the right direction, land use changes alone will not make downtown a great place to live. The following plan is designed to augment the Mayor's land use proposal to create a downtown that will attract residents and reduce sprawl.

The plan seeks to reach three key objectives:

- Create a downtown where a wide variety of residents would want to live, including families and those of moderate income. A key goal is to have people living closer to where they work.
- Expand affordable housing opportunities for downtown workers and families
- Create a more neighborly downtown by creating more reasons for residents to spend time in the neighborhood, such as developing quality park and community space

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Plan Summary

1. Increase affordable housing opportunities by doubling the amount of money housing developers pay into an affordable housing fund. The current proposal is \$10 per square foot. I propose that \$20 per square foot be designated for affordable housing.
2. Protect our city's unique style and character by helping preserve Seattle's historic buildings. When higher building heights are allowed, the incentive to demolish historic buildings is greater. Through the city's budget process, I sponsored a \$200,000 proposal for this purpose, which was subsequently passed by the City Council, to fund a downtown historic resources survey to identify our historic buildings and pave the way for them to be designated as historic landmarks. Historic buildings enhance the character downtown and make it a more attractive place to live.
3. Create healthier, high-performance buildings by requiring that new developments downtown adhere to the "Silver" LEED standard. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.) The current proposal is for "certification", the lowest LEED standard.
4. Achieve higher livability by committing to the creation of a Belltown Park and Community Center. While Belltown is a high-density neighborhood of approximately 8,000 residents, it has very little public park and community space. This is the missing link in the development of Belltown and was neglected during its initial development as a neighborhood. I propose a full city block for this type of space.
5. Create a more residential feel in the Denny Triangle by decreasing proposed building heights limits for office towers in that area and, at the same time, allow increased building heights in the Central Business District where there are already many commercial office towers.
6. Encourage more eyes on the street by reducing "dead zones" in buildings created by above ground parking garages. Currently, five or six floors of parking can be placed above ground-level retail stores with living units above the parking. Having so much space between the units and the streets creates situation where residents are disconnected from their neighborhoods.
7. Create a more family-friendly environment by initiating negotiations with the Seattle Public Schools to site an elementary school in the downtown area.
8. Implementing an audit of our city design review process to see how it can be better understood and strengthened if need be. While increased height is

often a topic of conversation when it comes to livability, many residents are more concerned about poor or unimaginative design than increased height.

9. Development of strategies and implementation tools to raise awareness of existing family friendly amenities in the downtown area and encourage creation of new family friendly amenities. Outcomes could include:
 - Inclusion of family-friendly features in the development of new parks and open spaces and incorporation of family-friendly features in existing center city parks;
 - Development of a Director's Rule that encourages family-friendly amenities for the public and private open spaces related to building development; and
 - Development of family-friendly "guidelines and examples" for adoption as part of the center city Design Review Guidelines.
10. Conduct an assessment as to how to make it safer to bicycle downtown. Many cyclists have shared concerns about the dangers bicycle commuters face as they make their way to work each morning. An assessment is needed as to how to not only how to make biking safer, but how to encourage bicycle commuting.
11. Requiring that showers be provided in large office buildings.
12. Requiring awnings on downtown buildings in order to make the pedestrian environment more pleasant along city streets.
13. Conducting a survey of Seattle's denser neighborhoods in order to determine how new developments will affect existing affordable housing that is being provided by the private market without any public subsidy. The funding for this survey, in the amount of \$50,000, was approved by the City Council during the 2006 budget cycle.
14. Exploring opportunities for retaining the incentives in the Transfer of Development Credits program by moving the program area to the downtown office core. The Transfer Development Credits program directly fights sprawl by permanently preserving rural land through the transfer of rural development rights to downtown."